The Medium Is the Matrix

Publishing on the World-Wide Web is blazing trails and establishing new modes of communication.

BY KEVIN M. SAVETZ

The pen is no longer the only writing implement mightier than the sword, and freedom of the press no longer requires a press. The mighty pen and grinding printing press are being challenged by something new: a quirky language called HTML (Hypertext Markup language) and a paperless printer known as the World-Wide Web.

In fact, the Web is changing what it means to publish a newspaper or magazine. Today, dozens of periodicals exist only as organized globs of ones and zeros on a Web page. The Web is even changing how publishers of traditional journals market their products.

No one at *Internet World* expects you to abandon your trips to the newsstand or cancel your favorite magazine subscriptions in favor of a PC and modem. Reading the latest news and gossip on a computer screen will probably never be as enjoyable (or as portable) as curling up in bed with a copy of *Reader's Digest* or shoving your nose deep in the *Examiner* to avoid eye contact with strangers on a cross-town bus.

However, you should expect publishing on the World-Wide Web to change the way publishers think, to change the way you perceive the media, and to give a voice to just about anyone who has something to say. Web publications in many cases will complement rather than replace traditional methods of publication (just as MecklerWeb complements *Internet World*). An increasing number of publications—including *Newsweek* and *Time*—are establishing Web sites and producing online versions. Although publishing on the Web will never replace traditional printed media, it already has begun to redefine it.

The type of content publishers ("publisher" being defined as anyone with access to a World-Wide Web server and a cursory knowledge of HTML) place on the Web can vary considerably. There are dozens of Web publications that don't exist in the "real world" of print media. Other magazines and newspapers publish their entire contents online as well as on paper. And many other traditional publishers place excerpts of their paper product online in the hopes that you'll purchase the whole enchilada.

The *San Jose Mercury News*, a forward-thinking newspaper based in central California, is bridging the gap between traditional publishing and electronic publishing.

"The technology is providing many different ways to distribute traditional newspaper information. In Silicon Valley (our market), it's important to reach out to users using new technologies. Our readers expect it, so we try to provide it," said Chris Jennewein, general manager of Mercury Center.

According to Jennewein, the Web's Mercury Center is accessed about 10,000 times every day. In addition to the Web site, the *San Jose Mercury News* operates a news forum on America Online as well as a news-clipping service called NewsHound (see sidebar "All the News

PHOTOGRAPH BY SCOTT VAN SICKLIN

THE SAN FRANCISCO
FREE PRESS
Welcome
Mercury Center Web
Chechen

That's Fit to E-Mail").

There's nothing magical about traditional methods of publishing. "We're not wedded to ink on paper," Jennewein added, "We want to be the one essential source of information for our market in the South Bay. A large part of our market wanted to receive information electronically. We feel strongly that we've got to lead the market, to lead today's readers info more personalized information retrieval."

(To see the *San Jose Mercury News*'s efforts, point your Web browser to **http://www.sjmercury.com**.)

An advantage of providing digital news to its readers is that the *San Jose Mercury News* can be read far and wide—by people way outside the paper's physical geographic area. This is true of most Web-based publications.

The New South Polar Times is a biweekly newsletter written by one of the staff at the Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station. The workshop leader, Katie Wallet, and the officer in charge of NOAA operations at the station, Lt. Tom Jacobs, decided that students and teachers from around the world would be interested in learning about Antarctica, the scientific research that's taking place at the station, and life at the station. Realizing that communication with individual classes was prohibitive because of the busy schedule of the staff at the station, they decided to create a newsletter that would be made available on the Internet.

Indeed, the newsletter is rather amazing. Written by a fairly lonely and very cold individual, it can give you a glimpse of a life you probably never considered—performing scientific experiments in temperatures of -30°C ("a rather warm day") in the dead of an Antarctic winter. This is a clear example of a person who doesn't have access to traditional publishing channels—and a newsletter that is perfectly suited to the global nature of the Internet. Check it out at **http://www.deakin.edu.au/edu/MSEE/GENII/NSPT/NSPThomePage.html**.

The Web is the closest thing to a level playing field in publishing today.

Even if your location is more civilized and your impact on the world at large less profound, a Web-based publication may be just the thing to make your voice heard. For instance, countless individuals have created online 'zines—electronic versions of the cheap art and gray-matter venues that litter college towns around the world (see sidebar "'Zines and Things").

It may sound trite, but the Web is the closest thing to a level playing field in publishing today. The Web page of a Fortune 500 company is no more expensive, no more important, and no easier to access than the one coded at 3 a.m. by a college freshman with a head cold. Everyone from bored kids to experimenting teachers—people with a lot to say or nothing at all—are publishing their pictures, prose, and persona on the Web.

Computer Mediated Communications (*CMC*) magazine is the perfect example of a publication that's distributed solely on the Net (**http://www.rpi.edu/~decemj/cmc/mag/current/toc.html**). *CMC* reports about people, events, technology, public policy, culture, practices, research, and applications of computer-mediated communication. It is distributed for free over the Internet, is privately published, and does not accept advertising. It does, however, exemplify Web-based media.

Boardwatch magazine, a print magazine covering BBSs and online services, also offers a Web site. Since the publishers have a paper-based magazine to sell, *Boardwatch*'s Web site (**http://www.boardwatch.com**) provides useful information without giving away the proverbial farm.

One of the finest and shortest-lived Web-based publications was the *San Francisco Free Press*. For 16 days in November 1994, striking union writers, editors, and other workers for the *San Francisco Chronicle* and *San Francisco Examiner* published a free online newspaper. The *Free Press*, known as "Freep" to

ALL THE NEWS THAT'S FIT TO E-MAIL

Of course, the Web isn't the only way to put a newspaper online. Electronic mail, available to millions more users than fancy Web browsers, is still the simplest way to get all the news.

The Mercury Center NewsHound is an easy-to-use news-clipping service. It automatically searches the stories and classified ads in a variety of newsy periodicals, including the *San Jose Mercury News*, the *Chicago Tribune, Detroit Free Press, Miami Herald, Philadelphia Inquirer, The New York Times* News Service, Associated Press, and PR Newswire as well as published and unpublished articles from 60 other sources for a total of about 2,000 articles a day. Articles and ads matching your interests are sent directly to you via e-mail.

Here's how it works: Once you sign up, you send a search request via e-mail to the NewsHound program. Each request that you submit includes lists of required, possible, and excluded terms.

Every hour or so, NewsHound checks to see whether any of its recent news and ads match your request. It automatically sends the ones that seem appropiate to you via e-mail. I use the service to receive articles about online services, my favorite musician, and ads for used computers.

Maybe this is what's meant by "power of the press"—the ability to receive just the news that's relevant to your interests or business. NewsHound currently has about 1,500 subscribers. While not free, it's inexpensive enough to be affordable for just about everyone.

The special rate for charter subscribers is $4.95 per month for up to five search profiles. That is a flat rate that applies regardless of the number of stories or ads delivered to you during the month. (The rate for non-charter subscribers is $9.95 per month.) For more information, send e-mail to newshound-support@sjmercury.com.

its followers, stopped publication when the striking workers resolved their contract disputes.

Back issues are still on the Net at **http://ccnet.com/SF_Free_Press**, and they're worth a look. The *Free Press* is a beautiful example of how a group of talented newspaper workers can get by without so much as paper to print on. Unfortunately, it couldn't (and wasn't intended to) make money.

Of course, publishing on the Web isn't the perfect answer for everyone. The major barrier: It's cumbersome to receive money over the Internet and difficult to limit access to paid subscribers. "The easiest way to approach Internet publishing is not to try to get money from the users—basically because we don't currently have competent—if any—monetary charge and transfer tools," explained Internet analyst Daniel Dern.

Dern notes that this is changing, but don't hold your breath. "Meanwhile," he added, "either find a way to get paid for making the information available or simply give away access to the information for free. Done appropriately, giving your information away for free can be an effective way to gain visibility, publicity, and generate sales of larger objects—e.g., CD-ROMs, books, floppies, art prints, T-shirts, and more."

Another problem with Web publishing stems from the nature of HTML, the code that represents how images and text are placed on the screen. HTML has been called (kindly) a graphic designer's nightmare. However, the recent past has seen additions to HTML (pushed forward mainly by the Netscape Web browser) that downgrade HTML from a nightmare to a bad dream.

What about advertising? Advertising on the Web is less of a problem than you might think. Corporate logos and Web page "sponsorships" are popping up all over the Net, and why shouldn't they? What do you think those elegant graphical Web browsers are for anyway? (Have you seen the AT&T logo on the Web yet? "You will.")

1995 is just the dawning of publishing on the Web. As HTML becomes more user-friendly and robust and more of us get faster Internet connections, and still more folks get access to the Net, the quantity and diversity of online publications will flourish. ■

Kevin Savetz (savetz@northcoast.com) is author of Your Internet Consultant—The FAQs of Life Online *(SAMS Publishing).*

'ZINES AND THINGS

If you're looking for some newsy reading material on the Web, look no further than Rosalind Resnick's page, a compilation of 50 reviews of major electronic publications. Check it out at http://www.gate.net/~rosalind.

Mind candy, anyone? Surf over to *Stream of Consciousness*, a poetry and art 'zine, at http://kzsu.stanford.edu/uwi/soc.html. **Or read *Verbiage*, a collection of short fiction at** http://sunsite.unc.edu/boutell/verbiage/index.html. **Then read *Digital Rag*** (http://www.wimsey.com/Digital_Rag/current/index.html)**, an odd little 'zine that defies description.**

A huge list of 'zines is available by gophering to gopher.cic.net **and choosing** Electronic Serials.

RADIONET
ACCESS THE INFOBAHN VIA THE AIRWAVES
RadioNet broadcasts the digital revolution every Sunday, covering the fusion of computers, video, and telecommunications.
KSCO AM 1080
Santa Cruz, CA
Sundays
10am - Noon
Featuring:
• Interviews With Industry Luminaries
• News & Politics
• E-Mail & Contests
• Original Music
Phone: 408/475-1080 • E-Mail:Radionet@radionet.com • Home Page:http://www.radionet.com/radionet/
CALL YOUR LOCAL RADIO STATION AND ASK FOR RADIONET!
Circle Number 86